

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Briefing Memo: Diplomacy in the Age of Revolution

Although the American colonies were physically remote from Europe, they were by no means insulated from European affairs. While colonists fought alongside the British against the French in both King William's and Queen Anne's wars, these conflicts were on the fringe---peripheral to the main action in Europe.

But the situation changed dramatically in 1754. The French and Indian War was the only Anglo-French conflict to begin in North America and to start before hostilities in Europe. It was a stunning victory for the British, but the outcome satisfied no one. The French were humiliated by the loss of their North American territories, the British were irritated by the unwillingness of the colonists to shoulder the financial burdens of Empire, and the Americans were tired of their automatic inclusion in European wars.

For the next 11 years, conflict between Britain and her colonies steadily increased, finally erupting into open warfare at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. The French toyed with the possibility of undermining the British by secretly aiding the colonists. In December 1775, the French received a report from a secret agent who convinced them that the time was ripe.

Secrets and Spies

Americans began to think of their international interests as distinct from those of Great Britain. The Continental Congress established a Committee of Secret Correspondence to handle its diplomacy, and the Committee dispatched its own secret agent, Silas Deane, to France in the spring of 1776.

Deane immediately entered into a world filled with intrigue, invisible ink, secret diplomacy, and arms funneled through dummy corporations. He also dealt with an array of

European aristocrats, volunteering for adventure in America. Congress identified and refined the objectives of an alliance with France, and sent its most sophisticated negotiator, Benjamin Franklin, accompanied by Arthur Lee to Paris. Franklin and his colleagues spent much of the next year waiting for the right opportunity to advance their cause.

The French were reluctant to be identified openly with the rebels, but the American victory at the Battle of Saratoga in October 1777 convinced them otherwise. After word reached Paris in December, Louis XVI gave permission for a formal alliance, and a final deal was struck in February 1778. The French and the Americans agreed to continue the fight until the colonies were independent, that neither side would seek an independent truce or peace without the formal consent of the other, and each guaranteed the other's New World possessions.

Peace and Independence

At the time, no one knew that the American victory at Yorktown in October 1781 would be the decisive battle of the war but in its wake, British support for continued fighting declined dramatically. After a change in government in London, the new Prime Minister, Lord Rockingham, sent an old friend of Franklin's to Paris in 1782 to begin peace negotiations. Negotiations began formally in May and quietly concluded in November.

The formal peace treaty was signed on September 30, 1783. Franklin's diplomatic portfolio expanded to include nearly all of the newly independent nation's diplomatic efforts. But few diplomatic moments have been as emotional as the first meeting between the new Minister in London, John Adams, and King George III. A new era had begun. ■